



Erica Williams-Connell daughter of Eric Williams T&T political leader from 1956 to 1981

“On August 31, 1962, a country will be free, a miniature state will be established, but a society and a nation will not have been formed. After August 31, 1962, the people of Trinidad and Tobago will face the fiercest test in their history -whether they can invest with flesh and blood the bare skeleton of their National Anthem, Here, every creed and race find an equal place.’ That is their challenge.

They may fail.....But merely to make the attempt, merely to determine to succeed, would be an enormous tribute to their capacity, a powerful inspiration to frustrated humanity.”

That was Eric Williams in his *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (p. 282). The book was an Independence gift to his people - a chronicling of their history - a history that had previously only been written by their colonizers. Trinidad and Tobago is now celebrating the 50th anniversary of this “independence”, so it is entirely appropriate to review the vision and aspirations that this popularly called “Father of the Nation” had for his people. You’ve heard all about the successes, so allow me to give a broad overview of a few other parameters, which might well be considered the bases of development, for without them, the country might as well be lost. Trinidad and Tobago is both a multiethnic and multi-religious society, with the vast majority of its citizens being either of African or Indian origin. Let’s listen to Eric Williams on the subject:

“Together, the various groups in Trinidad and Tobago have suffered, together they have aspired, together they have achieved. Only together can they succeed. And only together can they build a society, can they build a nation, can they build a homeland. There can be no Mother India, for those whose ancestors came from India....there can be no Mother Africa, for those of African origin. There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties.....There can be no Mother China, even if one could agree as to which China is the Mother; and there can be no Mother Syria and no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognize is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children.” Eric Williams, History of Trinidad and Tobago (p.279)

So how successful have we been in fulfilling this glorious mandate? Here are the facts. While Eric Williams was alive and arguably at no time since, Trinidad and Tobago owed its unrivalled reputation of harmony to the apparent ability of a number of races, colours and creeds to live together in relative tranquility. Since my father's demise, however, the ugly spectre of race has consistently raised its head in our polyglot society with existing tensions exacerbated, as political parties often seek to stake out their ethnic turf and to emphasize our differences rather than to celebrate our similarities. As the only Pro-Chancellor to date of the University of the West Indies, it was Eric Williams, of African heritage, who first proposed to Prime Minister Nehru the idea of a Chair in Indian Studies.

This was introduced in 1966 and the Government of India still provides the services of a scholar from that country. My father was also responsible for the inclusion of courses in African and Latin American Studies at the University. And it was his administration that introduced national religious holidays for our Muslim and Hindu brothers, while they were given carte blanche to organize their own schools, cultural programmes, radio and television productions.

Today, while we have not yet experienced the violent conflicts rife in some countries, race appears to permeate every aspect of the society – and in a manner not evidenced in Eric Williams' era. To be sure at that time, and during general election fever, both dominant races were sometimes guilty of inflammatory rhetoric, but this never reached the level – you could almost say of institutionalisation – as it has today. Now, politicians routinely “play the race card” for their own ends, and with a flagrant disregard for the consequences of their actions.

Now, depending on which political party is in the ascendancy – both major ones identified with one or the other of the leading groups – you will undoubtedly hear the mantra – “is we time now” – a vulgar reference to the notion of “it's our turn to be on top!” This sort of discrimination has been demonstrated by reports of wholesale firings, dismissal of established Boards and promotion bypasses. Yet despite the politicians' best efforts, there is some hope for the future, for the fastest growing population subset is those of “mixed” race. Let's talk about education. With his watchwords, “,” when Eric Williams came to power in 1956, only 14,000 students went on to secondary school, of which a mere 236 spaces were non-paying.

Some 30 years later, this figure had increased to 150,000 students attending free secondary school. Free tertiary education was also introduced in the 1970's, as a result of Trinidad and Tobago's oil windfall during the global energy crisis. This was abolished in the 1980's and only just reinstated a few years ago. But it's one thing to go to school for free, quite another as to what is being taught in the schools. Listen to Eric Williams again, as he urged the youth of the nation at Independence:

“You, the children, yours is the great responsibility to educate your parents, teach them to live together in harmony...To your tender and loving hands, the future of the Nation is entrusted. In your innocent hearts, the pride of the Nation is enshrined. On your scholastic development, the salvation of the Nation is dependent...you carry the future of Trinidad and Tobago in your school bags.”

Eric E. Williams, August 30, 1962 Independence Youth Rally

Unfortunately, while books are still carried in the school bags of today so, too in some instances, are knives, guns and drugs. There are countless examples of this. And how does one account for the fact that successive governments have long allowed foreign schools, attended by generations of Trinidad and Tobago students, to adhere to the curriculum of the mother country insofar as the social studies content is concerned, so that they know more about Canadian or British history, as taught in these schools, than they do about their own?

In fact, there appears to have been no formal attempt made by these foreign schools, and no government of Trinidad and Tobago has required it, to teach our citizens about our own land and region - its history, mores and culture. Just what are all these children going to do upon attaining adulthood – emigrate to Canada? This is independence? And what about democracy? As Williams so often said, the important thing about power is to know when not to use it. Here he is again:

“What use will you make of your Independence? What will you transmit to your children five years from today? The first responsibility that devolves upon you is the protection and promotion of your democracy. Democracy means more, much more, than the right to vote. Democracy means recognition of the rights of others. Democracy means equality of all in the eyes of the law. Democracy means the protection of the weak against the strong.

Democracy means the obligation of the minority to recognise the right of the majority. Democracy means responsibility of the Government to its citizens, the protection of the citizens from the exercise of arbitrary power and the violation of human freedoms and individual rights. Democracy means freedom of worship for all and the subordination of the rights of any one race to the overriding right of the human race.

Democracy means freedom of expression and assembly and organisation...All that is Democracy... Democracy, finally, rests on a higher power. It rests on an informed and cultivated and alert public opinion.”

Eric Williams, Independence Day Address, Trinidad & Tobago, August 31, 1962

Some time ago, there was a police raid on the offices of one of the major daily newspapers, and a home invasion of a reporter whose computer was seized – all in an effort to identify a specific source. Several international media organizations have publicly decried this particular “initiative”.

In terms of development, Eric Williams would say: ***“Development has a face – and that is the face of man. Development must, therefore, cater for the total needs of that man.”*** *Eric Williams, from EWMC Inauguration, Compton Bourne speech, March 22, 1998*

No one can deny that in the establishment of Trinidad and Tobago’s energy-based industries in the 1970’s – years before his death in office in 1981 – Eric Williams laid the foundation so that generations of our citizens would benefit from the “economic miracle” that is Trinidad and Tobago. In this respect, the country was characterized by the New York Times in 1998 as “A Tiger in a Sea of Pussycats.” All this was done amidst a cacophony of naysayers quarrelling noisily about his “waste of the national patrimony”. In 2010, it was estimated that the country’s per capita income was some US\$21,200 and it was, for several years, the leading exporter of liquefied natural gas to the US. In 1999, the first LNG plant in the western hemisphere was built in Trinidad and Tobago.

Using revenues from these energy-based industries, which today drive the economic engine of the country, Williams introduced free bus passes for students and senior citizens, the free tertiary education mentioned before, old age pensions and other social services, to benefit the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Searching diligently for a hook on which to hang its obstructionist hat, the opposition did a pretty credible job of labeling this policy the “dependency syndrome!” All this while the State of Alaska has, for years, routinely afforded every man, woman and child a portion of its oil dividends, sometimes amounting to over \$1,000 each!

Some “dependency syndrome!” What do they call it now, I wonder, when since 1999, and with its enormous wealth often not filtering down to the neediest, Trinidad and Tobago has earned the dubious distinction of harbouring “street children?” And what about Trinidad and Tobago’s international standing – despite our recent spate of Olympic medals and, notwithstanding humiliating diplomatic representations? No way would Williams have “kowtowed” for a White House breakfast, as did some Caribbean leaders, when the US wanted to nullify Caricom’s position in recognizing the International Criminal Court!

After all, this was a man who counted among his peers the likes of: Churchill, Lyndon Johnson, Nasser, Ben Gurion, Nkrumah, Nehru and Mao Tse Tung, among others. He was the only head of government selected as a founding member of the Governing Council of the United Nations University, headquartered in Japan.

And although the visit never materialized, as one of three other Commonwealth Prime Ministers, he was deputized by British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to visit Vietnam, in the hope of solving that country's long and bitter conflict.

Can Trinidad and Tobago today boast of such international respect and recognition when it won't even take the lead in forging the elusive Caribbean integration – a concept, by the way, that Eric Williams vociferously espoused almost 70 years ago, before the establishment of the European Common Market (precursor of the European Community [EC]). Consistently promoting this over the years, as late as 1973, he sent an article he wrote for Political Quarterly on “A New Federation for the Commonwealth Caribbean” to both his Caribbean Head of Government colleagues, as well as to the British. It was barely acknowledged! So, my premise is that Trinidad and Tobago has yet to fulfill totally the promise of Independence, or the vision of its founding father.

Crime continues to spiral out of control, in excess of one murder a day in a population of 1.3 m; our culture is being eroded at every turn, particularly in the declining standards of Carnival or the art form that was calypso; mediocrity is the order of the day – be it in politics, leadership, or service. One is left to lament Williams' advice:

“In our view, the development of this country rests ultimately with our people and their collective effort.”
Eric Eustace Williams

“...place always first the national interest and the national cause. The strength of the Nation depends on the strength of its citizens...”

Eric Williams, Independence Day Address, Trinidad & Tobago, August 31, 1962 Eric Williams made us “proud to be who we were, and optimistic, as never before, about what we were going to be – or could be”, so says Arnold Rampersad of Stanford University – and I think that is his most profound legacy. With hard work and an honest assessment of how much more needs to be done, we can hopefully embrace the admonition of the late scholar, Edward Said: “Memory is a powerful collective instrument for preserving identity. It is one of the main bulwarks against historical erasure. It is a means of resistance.”

In conclusion, there are two things about half a century of “independence” that give me pause. Was it worthwhile? Unequivocally, yes! For we are now the masters of our own destiny, with the power to either make or break our future, and that alone is reason to celebrate! No longer can we blame others for our successes or our deficiencies. We can look in that proverbial mirror to determine the road ahead or we can continue with blissful insouciance to ignore and diminish our history. The choice is ours to make. The other factor is that 50 years in the life of a nation implies its infancy.

Trinidad and Tobago has never lacked, in fact there is a saying that “God is a Trini” – and therein lies the problem. We have fought for nothing, in the way that many countries continue to do. Therefore, we appreciate nothing. One can only pray that as we mature – both as a people and as a nation – we will come to give life and meaning to Eric Williams’ final exhortation in 1979:

“...build the nation of Trinidad and Tobago, bringing in all the races; acknowledging all their contributions, elevating lowly castes, dignifying despised colours, achieving a syncretism here and a new autonomy there, raising up the poor and the lowly and giving them a positive stake in our society...”

Eric Williams Caribbean Man Speech to 21st Annual Convention of the PNM September 29, 1979

“...The humblest antecedents are not inconsistent with greatness of soul.”

Eric E. Williams, History of the People of TT p. 282, August 31, 1962